

Mission Table 2015: Case Statement on Discipleship

All that we endeavor to do is built upon the transformational power of discipleship. The Great Commission is our calling to multiply disciples who will obey the Great Commission.

History

Discipleship is defined as one Christian helping another Christian to grow in knowing, following and in giving service in the name of Jesus Christ. Moreover, discipleship is a living, dynamic relationship in Christ in which one is being shaped, transformed and renewed by His life, ministry and message. Discipleship is not adherence to a code, following a set of principles and tomes of spiritual guidance for living. Rather, it is an ongoing engagement with the living God. It is always in action and moving towards a positive destination, stagnant at times, but dynamic in its recovery liken to Paul's journey in the Philippians, "I press on..." (Philippians 3:14) or the inspiring and encouraging hymn, "I'm pressing on the upward way, new heights I'm gaining everyday..." (Higher Ground by Thomas Whitfield).

Discipleship is foundational to the person seeking to live a life following Jesus Christ. It:

- calls people to live according to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission;
- involves deepening one's spiritual walk through Bible study, prayer, worship and acts of grace;
- transforms one's life purpose from an inward focus to an outward focus;
- strengthens the body of Christ by calling Christians to embrace community;
- is the process of allowing space for the Holy Spirit to guide and direct one's life; and
- impacts every other Mission Table 2015 topic due to its foundational quality.

The core values of discipleship are:

- Formation: becoming transformed by Christ's truth
- Community: living the golden rule
- Evangelism: sharing our relationship to Jesus with others
- Space: allowing the Holy Spirit room in your life to guide and surprise
- Mission: joining God wherever we find ourselves
- Worship: reconnecting with the God who loves us/we serve
- Stewardship: sharing all that has been given to us for his purposes
- Prayer: living in constant communication with God

Churches that train their members to be disciples of Jesus teach the above core values.

Churches within the American Baptist Churches USA have a rich history of ensuring that discipleship serves as its core, foundational function. When Educational Ministries (EM) existed, the denomination was able to give strong attention to discipleship. With the dissolution of EM,

discipleship was shifted to other entities and did not have its earlier focus. Regions have carried discipleship and churches continue to find ways to incorporate discipleship into their ministries. The American Baptist Home Mission Societies (ABHMS) has produced a guide entitled, “2016 Discipleship & Christian Education Guide,” which is accessible on its website.

Accomplishments

Some identified accomplishments related to the topic are:

Discipleship has always been deeply valued by American Baptists. Born out of the Baptist Tract and Publication Society, for many years American Baptist Churches USA was blessed with Educational Ministries (EM), which carried the banner for discipleship. Through EM, training for Sunday School teachers and encouragement to Christian Educators was offered. EM also made possible many national youth gatherings that focused on “discipling” young people for Christ. Resources were available via staff members whose role allowed them to be out among churches nurturing the role of discipleship among American Baptists. With the closure of EM, American Baptist Home Mission Societies (ABHMS) and American Baptist regions have taken on the burden of promoting discipleship. While grateful for what ABHMS and regions are able to do toward discipleship, the Mission Table 2015 Discipleship workgroup continue to affirm the necessity of lifting up the importance of keeping discipleship at the forefront of ABC life.

Challenges

Some identified challenges related to the topic are:

- Helping church members see church as a place to become and make disciples, going beyond merely attending church on Sundays or seeing church as a “religious themed social club;”
- Creating space for discipleship to occur and equipping church members to become disciples; and
- Making discipleship fluid, relational and a lifestyle that church members “talk-the-talk and “walk-the-walk.”

Overall, there needs to be a collective strategy to discipleship. The question is how to encourage American Baptist Churches USA to develop, embrace and promote effective discipleship models.

- Educational Ministries will not return, so we need new energy (and materials) that will help the regions and churches ensure it is kept as a focus.
- Encourage the region to be INTENTIONAL about discipleship and mission work – to be CHRIST-like in who they are and what they do.
- Grow individuals and churches through small groups – if individuals feel cared for and have their needs met, then they will be faithful and actively involved in the church.
- There is a need to define discipleship, listing its characteristics and recognizing the many strategies needed to make disciples in varying cultures and contexts.

- There is a need to include Discipleship Ministry in church budgets in order to help raise it as a priority.

Constituents

The key stakeholders/constituents for this topic are:

- (1) Pastors/Ministerial Staff
- (2) Church members – at different levels in their faith journey, spanning “babes in CHRIST” to the “mature” Christian.
- (3) Individuals who have been “turned off” by the church
- (4) The “Unchurched” or individuals who do not/have never attended church

The best time to do discipleship is when a church is newly planted (when is likely to be open to new ideas and ways of providing worship services and ministries). For an existing church, it is recommended that “discipleable” individuals (from #2, #3 and #4) be identified and taken through the discipleship process while the church continues to carry out its religious activities/ministries. Additionally, church members who demonstrate good discipleship (from #1 and #2) should be identified to help the “discipleable” through the process.

FINAL THOUGHT:

“Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.”

–Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Background Scriptures:

II Timothy 2:2 Teaching using a hands-on approach
 I Corinthians 13 Stresses to show love the way CHRIST did
 Ephesians 2 Emphasizes tearing down walls of division
 Proverbs 22:6 Entails open-ended, continual training that begins at an early age

Other Resources

Grant Edwards Swimming Lessons: How to Keep New Christians Afloat in a Sinking World
 Grant Edwards First Steps